

Conrad's Warehouse (Union Canal Warehouse)  
Between Locks 38 & 39 on the Union Canal  
Bernville Vicinity  
Berks County  
Pennsylvania

HAER No. PA-57

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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORIC AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Engineering Record  
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# HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD

## CONRAD'S WAREHOUSE

HAER PA- 57

Location: On the channel of the Union Canal near where Conrad's Creek meets the canal adjacent to Pennsylvania Route 183 approximately 1-1/2 miles southwest of Bernville, Pennsylvania. The warehouse is between the sites of Union Canal locks 38 and 39.

Date of Construction: About 1830

Significance: This modest building is a rare survival of the canal era. It reflects the economic impact of the Union Canal.

Historian: Stuart Campbell

Transmitted by: Dan Clement, 1983

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## CONRAD'S WAREHOUSE

This modest building's importance is its existence. Few of the warehouses which served canal customers exist in 1976. [1] In terms of the Union Canal, the warehouse symbolizes the economic activity that improvement generated. In strictly local terms, Conrad's warehouse is part of the canal's impact on the Bernville-Mt. Pleasant corridor between locks 36 and 42.

## THE BUILDING

Conrad's warehouse is a four-bay two-and-one-half-story stuccoed rubble bond building. It is 40 feet long and 20 feet wide. It contains 1,150 square feet of storage space divided between two levels. It is built into a hill, the steepness of which may have been increased by blasting into bedrock to bring the Union Canal past this site. The building originally included a deck or wharf which jutted from the west, or canal side, of the building. Presumably boats stopped in front of the building to load or unload cargo. The northwest end of the building originally featured a large door through which cargo entered.

Conrad's warehouse is located on the Conrad-Bright farm. The exact date of construction is unknown. However, the probable date is ca. 1830 following the 1828 opening of the Union Canal. The builder of the warehouse would then have been Jacob Conrad. [2] He received the farm in 1821 from Joseph Conrad, his father. The name of the warehouse indicates it antedates 1847. In that year the farm passed to the Bright family.

## THE CANAL

Conrad's warehouse symbolizes economic life along the Union Canal (1828-1884). The canal connected the Susquehanna River at Middletown with the Schuylkill River at Reading. Improved navigation from Reading gave Union Canal shippers access to Philadelphia and other east coast points.

Pennsylvanians had long dreamed of a canal connecting the two rivers. Excitement and apprehension about the Erie Canal enabled Philadelphia's Union Canal Company to raise the nearly two million dollars construction required. [3] Construction occurred between 1821 and 1827.

Chief Engineers were Loammi Baldwin and Canvass White. White made most of the route and engineering decisions. He planned the 80-mile channel paralleling the Swatara and Tulpehocken Creeks.

The Union Canal failed to become the eastern highway for western traffic which its founders had planned. Narrow locks and railroad

competition sent through traffic elsewhere. However, the canal strongly influenced economic life in the southeastern Pennsylvania counties it served. As many as 900 boats per month carried such products as gypsum, grain, lumber, iron, anthracite and bituminous coal, flour, bacon, smoked meats, whiskey, tobacco, leather, salt, plaster, wool, hides, and limestone. [4]

Conrad's Warehouse was part of this traffic. Here local farmers or craftsmen could leave products for shipment west toward Lebanon or the Susquehanna or east toward Reading or Philadelphia. Eastern merchants might deliver their products for consignment to local merchants.

#### CONRAD'S WAREHOUSE AND THE BERNVILLE NEIGHBORHOOD

The warehouse is one of the few survivals of the economic life the canal generated in its neighborhood. The warehouse is located between Bernville and Mt. Pleasant. Mills and farms existed in the community before the canal. However, the waterway caused the founding of Bernville, laid out in 1819, and prompted the beginning of a number of new business ventures. [5] For example, Conrad's was only one of four warehouses in the area. Other enterprises included a foundry and machine shop, a tinsmith, a "segar" factory, a pottery, a distillery, two tanneries, several hotels, and a brickyard.

Most of these businesses closed when the Union Canal closed in 1884. The neighborhood reverted to the prosperous agricultural community it had been before the canal was built.

The building used as a warehouse survived in part because the portion of the Conrad-Bright farm on which it is located was not wanted for farming. Farmers considered the land relatively inferior. [6] In fact, the warehouse was only one of several business ventures attempted on the site no one wanted to farm. Other 19th-century activities included a powder mill, a clover mill, and a gristmill. The farm's small stream failed to provide enough water power to make these ventures viable.

After the canal closed, the site was little used. During the late 1920's owner Irwin Fred Weber began a vacation community which incorporated the warehouse. He built bungalows in a nearby field. The old warehouse was construction headquarters. Weber apparently intended the building to serve as the administrative center for his community. In addition, a portion of the canal channel near the warehouse was to be converted into a swimming pool for the resort.

Weber's community must have been a Depression casualty. He sold the property in 1933. Since that time the warehouse has been abandoned. This symbol of the busy canal days in the Bernville-Mt. Pleasant area had decayed by 1976 to an overgrown ruin.

Footnotes

1. E. F. LaFond, Jr., "Survey of Blue Marsh Dam Area of Berks County with Regard to Sites of Unusual Architectural and/or Historic Merit," Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Memorandum to U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Philadelphia Office, 15 December 1971, p. 3.
2. Thomas Kheel, Chain of Title, Conrad-Bright Farm, Historic American Buildings Survey, September 1976, p. 2.
3. Details of canal construction and finance are found in several sources, of which the best are James Weston Livingood, "The Economic History of the Union Canal," Historical Review of Berks County, III (January 1938), pp. 51-57, and Dean Augunst, The Two Canals of Lebanon County, Lebanon County (Pennsylvania) Historical Society Papers, Vol. XLV, Number 1 (Lebanon Historical Society, 1966). Union Canal Company papers are held by the Pennsylvania Archives, Harrisburg.
4. Herbert P. Reed, "The Story of the Union Canal and the Schuylkill Canal," (unpublished paper in possession of Marie Graeff, Robesonia, Pennsylvania, ca. 1969).
5. Jance C. DeLong and Pearl B. Kline, Bernville, Pennsylvania, 1851-1976 (Bernville, Pennsylvania: Bernville Bicentennial Committee, 1976), pp. 35 and 39.
6. This statement is based on numerous conversations with residents. A typical source is Beatrice Sheidy, Bernville, Pennsylvania, who farmed the farm next to Conrad's Warehouse for several decades. Local histories confirm the existence of various activities on the Conrad-Bright Farm. Unfortunately, such references are vague and apparently merely repetition of local tradition. None of these sites, including Conrad's Warehouse, is tabulated in manufacturing censuses. I believe they disappeared too quickly or were overlooked as other businesses were by census takers in what is now the Blue Marsh project area.

Bibliography

Delong, Janice C., and Kline, Pearl B. Bernville, Pennsylvania, 1851-1976. Bernville, Pennsylvania: Bernville Bicentennial Committee, 1976.

This is a commemorative bicentennial volume. Since there is little direct evidence about Conrad's warehouse, the volume's photographs, maps, and chronicling of local traditions helps reconstruct the milieu in which the warehouse existed.

Kheel, Thomas. Chain of Title, Conrad-Bright Farm. Historic American Buildings Survey, 1976.

Mr. Kheel's annotated list of holders of this property is the most detailed history of the property available. Possibly because the land was poor, the farm was divided several times. This source makes sense out of the confusion about ownership these divisions caused.

LaFond, E. F., Jr. "Survey of Blue Marsh Dam Area of Berks County with Regard to Sites of Unusual Architectural and/or Historic Merit." Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, 1971. (Typewritten memorandum.)

Mr. LaFond was in 1971 Keeper, Pennsylvania Register of Historic Sites. This four-page memorandum comments at length on the importance of various sites within the Blue Marsh project. He explains that although Conrad's warehouse was a typical structure during the 19th century, its existence today makes it a rare survival.

Livingood, James Weston. "The Economic History of the Union Canal." Historical Review of Berks County, III (January 1938), pp. 51-57.

The title accurately describes this major article.

Longtime local residents are knowledgeable about the history of Conrad's warehouse. No one living recalls canal days. Local contacts who know the traditional stories about the warehouse are Beatrice Sheidy and Paul Speicher, both of Bernville, Pennsylvania.

Addendum:

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